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U. S. Department of Agriculture

HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT

Thursday, January 7, 1937

(FOR BROADCAST USE ONLY)

Subject: "PITY THE POOR HOUSE PLANT." Information from the Bureau of Plant Industry, United States Department of Agriculture.

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Now is the time when the fortunate person given house plants for Christmas begins to doubt her good fortune if she has had limited experience in growing them.

Any one of a number of things may have happened to the plants by now -- and undoubtedly at least one trouble has befallen the plants of the inexperienced. The leaves have begun to fall, withered and sere; the leaf tips have started turning brown; or the foliage is turning a sickly shade of yellowish green; or is showing spots.

All or any of these symptoms irritate the owner of the plants. She has spent good time and effort only to be rewarded by some fine cases of general plant debility. It looks like a plain case of diabolical conspiracy against the owner of the plants. Pity and commiserations are in order, from the horticulturists who understand about the ills and frailties of house plants.

But not pity and commiseration for the owner of the plants. Far from it. At this season of the year the horticulturists pity the poor house plant, too.

Furman Lloyd Mulford of the U. S. Department of Agriculture once was assigned the job of writing a little manual on the care of house plants. This gave him a chance to expose to the public view the sad situation of these friends of mankind. Let me give you his catalog of the troubles of house plants:

"(Quoting) Compared with the moisture laden air maintained for successful plant culture in greenhouses, the atmosphere of the average house is of desert dryness. . . .

"Most houses are several degrees too warm for successful plant culture; the temperature people usually consider desirable in their living rooms is 10 to 15 degrees too high, except for a few kinds of plants, and for them only when they are in full sunshine... .

"Light conditions in houses are usually unfavorable for plant culture.

"Drafts of cold air or night temperatures that approach freezing handicap house plants.

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"Some kinds of plants are adapted to the dry atmosphere of the American home; others can stand the unfavorable light conditions; but all are injured by some kinds of gases that often lurk about the house. Illuminating gases, of course, are harmful -- they are harmful in amounts so small that a person won't know that they are coming into the room from a very tiny leak in the gas system of the house. Gases escaping from furnaces, ranges, or heating stoves, or from oil or gas lights, also will start plants down the long, long trail that leads to the trash can." (End of Mr. Mulford's remarks on the hard life of the house plant.)

But I can hear the practical homemakers in this audience saying, "We agree with Mr. Mulford about the dreadfully hazardous existence of plants in the home. But how shall we know what particular hazard threatens our particular plants and what to do about it?"

Mr. Mulford is a practical person, and so he has compiled a catalog of the causes of unhealthful appearances in house plants, a catalog which I am pleased forthwith to read to you:

"General defoliation suggests gas poisoning, although it may be due to a sudden change in temperature, shock from transplanting when in vigorous growth, or changing from strong sunlight to a dark place. If, following the dropping of the leaves, the shoots remain dwarfed, branch repeatedly, and put out small leaves, gas injury is rather indicated.

"Browning of the leaf tips suggests improper watering, exposure to drafts of cold air, or insect attacks. With aspidistras it may be due to water not penetrating the ball of earth in the pot when watering, or to excessive heat from exposure to full sunshine when not hardened to it; with palms it may be due to worms on the roots or to lack of plant food; with ferns, when combined with loss of color and failure to develop new shoots, the presence of insects may also be suspected.

"Loss of normal color of the foliage suggests overwatering, lack of plant food, and insect attacks, especially scales, spider mite, and mealybug.

"Spotted foliage suggests overwatering or burning from direct sunlight on foliage that has not been accustomed to it."

And there you have Horticulturist Mulford's descriptions of the symptoms of plant ailments and the prescriptions for treatment. Of course, with plants as with human beings or animals, prevention is a lot better than cure. So Mr. Mulford advocates watching the house plant closely, seeing that it gets the right amount of water but not too much, that it is not allowed to become pot-bound by staying too long in one pot, that it gets plant food at the right time and in the correct amounts, and that it has a bath now and then to take away the soot and dust which inevitably will collect on the foliage.

If you would like more pointers on the care and feeding of house plants please drop me a line and let me know. Perhaps we can get some more information from the horticulturists of the U. S. Department of Agriculture.
